

Into the Future with Mounted-Maneuver Reconnaissance

by Dr. Robert S. Cameron

Change characterizes the historical evolution of mounted-maneuver reconnaissance. New platforms, improved equipment, organizational shifts, evolving doctrine and training modifications have been an inherent part of the scout's experience since the first incorporation of motor vehicles into reconnaissance organizations.

Yet, amid change, the individual scout's purpose and capabilities have remained consistent, summarized by then-COL Crosbie E. Saint in 1977: "He must be capable of finding the enemy and knowing what he sees. He should be able to go forward to find the enemy and have the firepower with and behind him to get out of trouble. Most of all, he must be capable of semi-independent operations on the battlefield. He must be resourceful – he must be the most clever of all fellows. He takes individual actions that are not dictated by the actions of what other squads or platoons are taking; no one is constantly looking over his shoulder."¹

These qualities are especially relevant given the variable location, topography and demographic conditions expected to characterize tomorrow's operational environment. Potential threats will likely employ a mix of high- and low-tech capabilities in addition to terror tactics to achieve area denial and disrupt U.S. operations. Their expected reliance upon unmanned systems, robotics and an array of electronic measures ensures a complex environment designed to offset current American military supremacy. In all cases, threat forces are expected to be highly adaptive and employ a range of different capabilities to create tactical conundrums and target U.S. vulnerabilities. Threat tactics will likely change repeatedly to create confusion and opportunities to exploit at the expense of the U.S. Soldier and overall American objectives.

How then do we organize, equip, train and imbue the "most clever of all fellows" with the right principles to operate successfully against such a threat? The answer lies in the extraction of insights and lessons-learned from the operational history of mounted-maneuver reconnaissance. In the 80 years since the creation of motorized reconnaissance platoons and

mechanized cavalry, a wealth of experience has been accumulated across the spectrum of military operations. What have we learned?

Scout survivability

Scouts need the means to determine hostile intent, disposition and activities through multiple methods. Traditionally, reconnaissance organizations, doctrine and training have tended to favor either an aggressive approach that accepted the need to fight for information or a passive stance that emphasized stealth, combat avoidance and undetected observation. The meandering evolutionary path that resulted created widespread turbulence, since the organizational, training and materiel needs necessary for stealthy reconnaissance starkly contrasted with those required for more aggressive information collection. It also generated confusion in the field, especially during periods of rapid shifts between these extremes. The 1950s and early 1960s, for example, witnessed the reorganization of the battalion scout platoon three times in less than 10 years.²

Ironically, fighting for information and collecting intelligence through undetected

observation are equally valid methods of reconnaissance. They are not mutually exclusive but complementary, and battlefield experiences since World War II have demonstrated the value of each. Given the Army's current global perspective and the uncertainty surrounding the precise identification of the future threat and battlefield, commanders need the flexibility to adjust their operations to fit unique operational environments. The ability to use stealthy or aggressive reconnaissance methods as appropriate and on-demand increases adaptability and gives commanders more options to develop uncertain situations.

Reconnaissance organizations require a degree of combat power and survivability. The maneuver battalion scout in World War II trained to conduct reconnaissance via stealthy movement and undetected observation. When successful, his actions often guided the parent battalion's operations. However, the jeep-mounted battalion scout possessed minimal firepower and even less protection. German combined-arms counter-reconnaissance teams too often forced the platoon to withdraw or face destruction. In either event, the reconnaissance mission ended. When not detected, battalion scout platoons often



Scouts train in dismounted observation and movement techniques in the 1980s. (U.S. Army photo)

found themselves immobilized by a hostile presence. Lacking the means to overcome even light resistance, the platoon became pinned, unable to continue its reconnaissance mission without endangering itself.

Initial or chance contact is detrimental to scouts; they must be able to survive it. Otherwise, their information collection ends upon contact, and situation development does not occur. In the Korean War, jeep-mounted scouts followed an aggressive reconnaissance doctrine that ensured their forward presence. They often were the first to encounter the enemy and suffered accordingly. Related training stressed the importance of abandoning the vehicle when under fire – a practice that saved lives at the cost of the scout's mobility. Similar survivability issues surrounded the later employment of the humvee-equipped scout units. Therefore commanders in both Operations Desert Storm and Iraqi Freedom often marginalized their use to prevent their destruction through enemy action.

In the examples noted above, scouts lacked requisite capabilities. They could not fight for information, overcome light resistance or block enemy reconnaissance efforts. They could not respond to evolving tactical situations or accelerate their operational tempo without significant risk. Adaptive and aggressive enemies understand the importance of reconnaissance and information dominance, making scouts high payoff targets and their named areas of interest positions to be defended. This lesson became clear to the Israeli Defense force during operations against Hezbollah in the 2006 Second Lebanon War and to our own forces during the Heavy Brigade Combat Team Reconnaissance Squadron Experiment the following year.

Reconnaissance platforms must provide scouts the ability to survive a sudden contact situation and maneuver in proximity to an enemy. The absence of ballistic protection transforms the scout into a victim waiting to happen – a circumstance well understood by scouts who served in jeep units during World War II and Korea, and later by reconnaissance personnel assigned to humvees. Indeed, the notion of unprotected platforms was denounced as early as 1938 as “the most inane, asinine proposal that’s ever been submitted.”³

Scout vehicles

Conversely, heavily armed and armored platforms are not the answer. The 1970s witnessed reconnaissance units heavily endowed with combat power and the proliferation of main battle tanks and improved tow vehicles at the platoon level. The emphasis given to antitank firepower and survival on a mechanized battlefield increased the firepower of reconnaissance units but at the cost of their ability to gather information. This trend called into question whether such units constituted reconnaissance organizations or merely maneuver units by another name.

The fielding of the M3 Cavalry Fighting Vehicle in the 1980s did not resolve this issue. Its size, weight and noise signature made it the antithesis of what most scouts desired in a platform, resulting in the quip that “reconnaissance in a Bradley is like doing reconnaissance in a Winnebago.”⁴ The M3's array of weapons solved the problem of firepower, but it also encouraged firefights at the expense of information collection.

Scouts today need a balance between the extremes represented by the humvee and the M3. In fact, they are overdue for a new vehicle. No purpose-built reconnaissance

vehicle has been fielded in significant numbers since the M114 in the 1960s – and it proved a disappointment. Since then, scouts have made use of vehicles designed for purposes other than tactical reconnaissance, including the M113, the M3, the humvee, the Stryker and even the mine-resistant, ambush-protected vehicle.

Simultaneously, they have watched the demise of reconnaissance-specific vehicle programs, particularly the Future Scout Vehicle, the Future Scout and Cavalry System and the Reconnaissance and Surveillance Vehicle. The last ended with the Future Combat Systems program. Scouts need a platform with armor and armament to ensure initial contact survival, enable destruction of resistance when necessary and permit mission execution in the enemy's presence.

Recce organization

Organizationally, reconnaissance units require a mix of capabilities and the ability to perform more than one type of mission. These capabilities need not be concentrated at the platform or platoon level. Past attempts to create entirely self-sufficient platoons have not lasted long. The combined-arms reconnaissance platoon of the late 1940s and Korean War era posed training, command and employment problems difficult to overcome. The standardized M3 scout platoon of the early 1980s quickly fell into disfavor because it lacked qualities later sought in the humvee platoon.

For the future, it may be more appropriate to concentrate desired capabilities at the troop level. In the 1950s, redesign of the armored division resulted in a proposed reconnaissance organization with pure platoons that could be integrated at the troop level. The platoons benefited



Jeep-mounted scout platoon patrols in North Africa, February 1943. (U.S. Army photo)



The M114. Initially considered an ideal scout platform due to its combination of armored protection and relatively small size, in fact the vehicle suffered from mobility constraints and poor operational readiness rates. (U.S. Army photo)

from simplified training, command, supply and maintenance, while the troop possessed a variety of task-organization options. The notion of pure platoons and troop-level integration later found expression in the 1980s “2x2” configuration of the armored cavalry regimental troop. The latter included a headquarters, mortar element, two tank platoons and two scout platoons. The pure platoon composition was balanced by a combined-arms capability at the troop level. A similar design using current platforms in lieu of the tanks and Bradleys of the Army of Excellence era offers a variety of employment options that can be tailored to different environments.

Reconnaissance, security and economy-of-force roles are missions with proven utility and which encompass a broad range of activities. Building an organization to satisfy these roles creates by default an adaptable unit. Such organizations generally transition to a more limited focus mission easily, while single-purpose organizations struggle when forced to broaden their activities.

The armored cavalry regiment has proven its value across the spectrum of military operations precisely because it possessed the means and orientation to transition from one mission type to another on short notice and without additional assets. Throughout much of its history, the regiment’s basic structure remained unchanged, while other reconnaissance units

underwent repeated fundamental redesign. Despite the removal of this unit type from the Army force structure, its heritage of success derived from a capability mix should not be ignored in the design of future mounted-maneuver reconnaissance units.

Reconnaissance units optimized for information collection lack flexibility and the organic assets necessary for a broader mission focus. Too often such units have been forced by the nature of their operational environment into roles for which they were neither configured nor trained. A painful adjustment process followed in which trial and error measures predominated. In World War II, mechanized cavalry organizations deployed to Europe oriented upon the singular mission of pure reconnaissance.

Operational realities, however, led to their employment in a much broader mission set. Reconnaissance occurred, but generally in the context of other activities rather than as a stand-alone mission. Security, economy-of-force, mobile reserve and combat operations proved much more frequent.⁵ This reality led one mechanized cavalry officer to conclude:

“Efforts and doctrine directed towards making the cavalry squadron exclusively a reconnaissance unit, not participating in combat other than as a necessity of extrication from enemy reaction or in the exceptional case of limited engagement by fire to obtain information desired, is [sic] faulty. It is evident that there is no occasion, no opportunity and justification for the maintenance in large commands of such an extremely costly, highly trained organization simply for the purpose of executing ‘reconnaissance.’”⁶



A mechanized cavalry reconnaissance column in France, August 1944. (U.S. Army photo)



An armored humvee of 1st Cavalry Division during the fighting in An Najaf. The gunshield and added ballistic protection improved crew survivability at the cost of scout mobility. (U.S. Army photo)

Mounted-maneuver reconnaissance units experienced a similar broadening of scope in later wars. In the nonlinear and unconventional Vietnam War, “the elusive nature of the enemy and insufficient friendly intelligence regarding the location and activities of the enemy require that units must expect contact with the enemy at any time and from any direction.”⁷ Consequently, battalion scouts and armored cavalry organizations frequently performed reconnaissance in force operations that culminated in combat to fix and/or destroy hostile forces before they could escape. After reconnaissance-in-force, security and economy-of-force missions proved among the most frequently performed.

Operation Iraqi Freedom witnessed the operational debut of the reconnaissance, surveillance and target-acquisition squad-

ron. This unit possessed an array of information collection and analysis capabilities linked via a digital communications network to provide situational awareness for its parent brigade. Its information-collection orientation and lack of combat power resulted in initially timid employment to minimize losses. However, theater requirements to secure territory from insurgent influence soon outweighed concerns about the squadron’s limited capabilities.

RSTA squadrons found themselves assigned an area of responsibility to secure and charged with the same mission set as maneuver battalions. Moreover, subordinate platoons needed to engage insurgents upon discovery to ensure their destruction. RSTA squadron commanders therefore improvised and adopted ad hoc measures, and sought augmentation. The success of

these efforts reflected soldier ingenuity and the willingness of senior leaders to divert assets to bolster an organization whose design emphasis upon information collection minimized its ability to adapt.

Reconnaissance organizations reconfigure in the field or employ in peripheral roles when they cannot adjust to their operational environment. In World War II, corps commanders transformed their mechanized cavalry groups into more broadly capable organizations through the attachment of tanks, tank destroyers, engineers, infantry and artillery. The enhanced groups proved capable of a broader range of actions more suited to corps needs, particularly reconnaissance, security and economy-of-force roles. Tank-battalion commanders assigned light tanks to their jeep scouts to provide them a degree of survivability and permit them to operate in the presence of enemy counter-reconnaissance elements.

Operation Desert Storm witnessed the use of modified reconnaissance platoons to offset the prior removal of tanks from the division cavalry squadron. Similarly, survivability concerns led to alteration of humvee scout platoons in Operation Iraqi Freedom, to include an M3/humvee mix.

The high operational tempo established for the drive to Baghdad in 2003 forced reconnaissance organizations to deviate from the time-intensive, stealth-based practices stressed in scout doctrine and training. The 3rd Infantry Division’s division cavalry squadron relied upon its mixed tank and Bradley hunter-killer teams to achieve success in a series of movement-to-contact situations. It had little difficulty performing the screen, guard and economy-of-force missions the division commander required.



The vulnerability of the brigade and battalion scout platoons, however, led to their deliberate employment very close to maneuver units for protection or in non-reconnaissance roles. Analysis of initial operations in Iraq concluded, "In short, they [commanders] elected to give up their 'eyes' rather than risk losing them. Put another way, commanders chose not to employ scouts and brigade reconnaissance troops in the role for which they were intended."⁸

Augmentation or cross-attachment has often been used to bolster mounted maneuver reconnaissance capabilities. The additional combat power thus provided permitted a broader mission set and offset perceived capability shortcomings. In World War II, mechanized cavalry and battalion scouts benefited from augmentation, while Vietnam witnessed the routine cross-attachment of assets to ensure that reconnaissance organizations possessed a robust, combined-arms capability. Similarly, Operation Iraqi Freedom witnessed the light 2nd Armored Cavalry Regiment's exchange of a ground cavalry squadron for a tank battalion initially

to boost its combat power in Baghdad and later to facilitate operations against the Mahdist militia.

Periodic attachments to perform a special mission or overcome a unique challenge make sense. Regular augmentation to perform common missions does not. The latter suggests an ineffective organizational design and a resource drain upon the augmenting unit or formation. Given the current size of the Army's brigade combat teams, this diversion of capability will be difficult to sustain, especially in the face of a more robust threat than what has been encountered in Iraq and Afghanistan. Nor is it realistic to assume that such external assets will always be available and not required for other missions.

Augmentation enhances one organization at the expense of another. Therefore, the design of mounted-manuever reconnaissance organizations must reflect their realistic employment in major conventional wars, counterinsurgency and stability actions. Built-in reliance upon augmentation to perform missions likely to be assigned does not create adaptability or responsiveness to command needs.

Doctrinal balance

Building versatile and adaptive reconnaissance organizations means restoring the doctrinal balance between reconnaissance and security, and accepting the related organizational and training implications. Doctrine traditionally gave equal emphasis to reconnaissance and security, depicting the two as interwoven and related. This balance ensured unit configurations designed to perform the full range of reconnaissance and security actions appropriate to their parent command. The RSTA squadron design deviated from this trend.

Intended to operate via stealth and exploit standoff technologies, doctrine for the RSTA squadron encouraged combat avoidance and sharply reduced security responsibilities. Financial and personnel constraints influenced this decision, but the RSTA squadron's doctrinal retreat from an active security role that entailed combat spread to other reconnaissance organizations. The growing imbalance between the importance attached to reconnaissance and the de-emphasis of security increased with the elimination of the division cavalry squadron and the ar-



M3 Cavalry Fighting Vehicle at the National Training Center. Given its size and firepower, some considered this vehicle the antithesis of the ideal scout platform. (U.S. Army photo)

mored cavalry regiment. No reconnaissance organization remained with the doctrinal responsibility or the means to perform a broad range of security missions except in a permissive environment.

Surveillance is not security. Sensors and information-gathering devices have proliferated over the last 20 years. Their growing capabilities support other technologically based trends intended to achieve near-perfect situational awareness. Nevertheless, surveillance remains a passive activity.

In the context of security missions, sensors and related devices collect data over time to help determine threat patterns of activity, provide warning of a hostile presence and assist in information-collection efforts targeting a particular community. Through these measures, surveillance missions and assets help commanders monitor their area of operation. However, they do not offer protection, cannot stop an enemy probe and are not suited to fast-paced combat operations. Hence, they cannot fulfill the traditional security responsibilities of screen, guard and cover. Nor can they replace the analytical and intuitive capabilities of the ground scout.

Reconnaissance organizations at all levels require a robust dismount capability. Since World War II, they have faced the challenge of executing a growing list of dismounted operations while satisfying vehicle-manning requirements. No reconnaissance unit ever protested the assignment of too many scouts, but they have struggled at times to retain even a limited dismounted capability.

Routine losses through casualties, illness, leave and school attendance ensure that organizations are rarely at full strength. Unit commanders therefore improvise to sustain the ability to get on the ground. Faced with an overwhelming demand for dismounted operations, it was not uncommon for the World War II reconnaissance platoon to park its vehicles and operate entirely on foot. In the 1980s and 1990s, understrength scout platoons equipped with the M3 concentrated their available dismount teams on just one or two vehicles. The original recce-platoon design for the RSTA squadron increased the scout-to-platform ratio. It provided a three-man dismount team for each vehicle, but the overall platoon strength dropped to just 21 Soldiers. These platoons encountered significant challenges in Iraq and Afghanistan, where they sim-

ply lacked enough scouts to perform routine missions.

Mounted-maneuver reconnaissance doctrine must provide guiding principles applicable to varied environments. It should provide the conceptual underpinnings for all other facets of reconnaissance and reflect the full range of scout activities. Doctrine that reflects a preferred template superimposed upon operational realities is not likely to survive contact with friendly scouts or the enemy. It needs to incorporate a body of proven principles that are flexible enough to fit operational needs.

The emergence of networked, digital systems and access to a variety of intelligence assets in the late 1990s offered commanders the promise of unprecedented situational awareness. These new digital systems and communications encouraged a belief in the scout's ability to gain contact and develop the situation from afar, avoiding both detection and the risk of engagement. Dubbed "the new contact paradigm," this concept resulted in the skewing of reconnaissance doctrine to a narrow focus upon long-range information detection via stealth.

However appealing, this technology-driven concept proved unrealistic. The move-





A humvee equipped with the Long-Range Advanced Scout Surveillance System. This device's ability to see targets at great distances encouraged the notion that scouts could develop situations from afar. (U.S. Army photo)

ment-to-contact nature of the 2003 march to Baghdad precluded a neat application of the new contact paradigm. In Iraq and Afghanistan, the nature of the conflict, threat and terrain forced scouts to mingle among the populace and close with potential hostile elements to identify them and determine their capabilities and intent. Urban operations in particular often made standoff reconnaissance ineffective. Field manuals, however, remained rooted in the new contact paradigm and discouraged both criticism and the adoption of alternate information-collection methods better suited to the operational environment.⁹ Abandoned by doctrine that did not reflect the realities they faced, commanders in the field developed their own tactics. Doctrine became disconnected from the field and marginalized until the emergence of updated doctrinal guidance near the end of the Iraq war.

Conversely, operations overseas demonstrated the utility of multidimensional reconnaissance. This doctrinal concept focused reconnaissance upon a broad range of social and demographic factors in addition to enemy combatants and terrain, and it reflected the growing importance of understanding and interacting with local populations. Multidimensional reconnaissance fit global urbanization trends and the likelihood of future deployments that place American Soldiers among foreign civilian populations. Its codification within doctrine ensured a degree of visibility otherwise dependent entirely on unit commanders. However, the broader range

of information included in multidimensional reconnaissance underscores the importance of issuing scouts clear information objectives to prevent the accumulation of situational data that does not facilitate rapid decision-making.

Training, doctrine and organizational design need to be synchronized. Currently, responsibility for these areas lies scattered among several different offices within the Maneuver Center of Excellence, each reporting to a different chain of command. This arrangement has not prevented the generation of highly trained scouts, but it is nevertheless a collection of stovepiped processes. Centralized coordination with senior command oversight would synchronize these separate but related efforts and ensure the best use of the limited resources available to reconnaissance trainers, training developers, doctrine writers and combat developers.

Conclusion

The way forward for mounted-maneuver reconnaissance is anything but simple. Yet a robust and effective reconnaissance community is vital to the overall success of the maneuver forces. The range and nature of potential threats underscores the need for reconnaissance assets able to satisfy priority information requirements in all likely operational environments. Scouts must be characterized by a high degree of mental agility and organizational flexibility to keep pace with rapidly changing tactical situations and make

rapid adjustments to their own operations. Their adaptability must be on par with and preferably higher than that of the threat. The challenge lies in actually achieving this desired endstate.

For more information on the historical experiences of mounted-maneuver reconnaissance upon which these ideas were based, see *To Fight or Not to Fight? Organizational and Doctrinal Trends in Mounted Maneuver Reconnaissance from the Interwar Years to Operation Iraqi Freedom* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute, U.S. Army Combined Arms Center, 2010) available via free download from http://usacac.army.mil/cac2/cgsc/carl/download/csi-pubs/cameron_fight.pdf.



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Notes

¹ Saint, COL Crosbie E., "Cavalry Today," *ARMOR*, LXXXVI, No. 4 (July-August 1977). Saint graduated from the U.S. Military Academy in 1958. He received his armor commission and rose steadily through the ranks, commanding both cavalry and armor organizations. He served two tours in Vietnam and five in Europe. He retired in 1992 as a four-star general.

² The 1956 Reorganization of the Current Armored Division introduced a pure scout platoon, followed by a return of the combined-arms reconnaissance platoon starting in 1962 with the Reorganization of the Objective Army Division. Within a couple of years, another reorganization marked the return to a pure scout platoon.

³ Quoted in Matthew D. Morton, "Horses for 'Iron Ponies': The Interwar Development of Mechanized Ground Reconnaissance," master of arts thesis, Florida State University, 2001.

⁴ Cranston, John, "Assessment by Major General Thomas H. Tait of His Tenure as Commanding General, U.S. Army Armor Center and Fort Knox, June 1986-August 1988, end-of-tour interview, Aug. 18, 1989, Armor Branch archives.

⁵ U.S. forces, European Theater, "General Board, Study No. 49: Tactics, Employment, Technique, Organization and Equipment of Mechanized Cavalry Units," Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1945, Appendices 3-5.

⁶ War Department Observers Board, "AGF Report No. 1007: Mechanized Cavalry Organization and Tactics," June 5, 1945.

⁷ U.S. Army Vietnam, "Mechanized and Armor Combat Operations in Vietnam," report, March 28, 1967, Armor Branch archives.

⁸ Fontenot, retired COL Gregory, Degen LTC E.J. and Tohn, LTC David, Operation Iraqi Freedom Study Group, *On Point: The United States Army in Operation Iraqi Freedom*, Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2004.

⁹ See, for example, the August 2006 version of *FM 3-20.96: Reconnaissance Squadron*, Pages 2-23 and 1-9 to 1-10.

ACRONYM QUICK-SCAN

RSTA - Reconnaissance, Surveillance, and Target Acquisition

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The Armor School is seeking nominees from Army commands for the 17th Annual Frederick M. Franks Award, to be presented at the 2013 Army Reconnaissance Summit in March.

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Also, this individual should possess two or more of the following characteristics:

- Offered a vision for the future of mounted warfighting force that significantly improved survivability, lethality, maneuverability or mobility;
- Developed an innovation in equipment, materiel or doctrine that significantly enhanced the effectiveness of the mounted element of combat arms;
- Exemplified professional excellence in demeanor, correspondence and leadership on issues relevant to mounted warfare; or
- Displayed a zeal for Soldiering through leadership skills, recognition of the sacrifice and achievements of subordinates, and attention to the Chief of Armor.

Each unit must develop a process that allows recommendations from the lowest level to participate. Packets must contain, at minimum, the Officer Record Brief/Enlisted Record Brief with a photo of the Soldier, a letter of recommendation stating why the nominee meets the preceding criteria and letters of endorsement from brigade and division/post level. More information regarding the quality of the nominee is highly recommended.

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For more information concerning the Franks Award, contact the OCOA coordinator via email at david.winczewski@us.army.mil, commercial (706) 545-0577 or DSN 835-0577.